

Pierre Trudeau: Captivating a Nation

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Introduction

On an overcast October morning in Montreal, thousands of people made their way to Notre-Dame Basilica to witness the state funeral of a major Canadian political figure. Former prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau had died a few days before at the age of 80. In the weeks prior to his death, Trudeau's failing health had been public knowledge; nonetheless, his death had a profound effect on the collective psyche of the nation. Trudeau had resigned as prime minister in 1984, and in the succeeding years had kept a fairly low profile, interrupted only by his forceful interventions in the debates over the Meech Lake and Charlottetown constitutional accords. An entire generation of young Canadians had been born and grown to near adulthood after he left the public stage. Canada had changed much, and four prime ministers had assumed the office since his resignation. However, the unprecedented grief and sorrow over his death was a clear indication of the profound and enduring although often ambivalent feelings of Canadians toward this remarkable man.

Trudeau's funeral in Montreal was itself an event of considerable historic importance. From all parts of Canada and the world, both friends and political foes came to pay tribute. Joe Clark, who had battled Trudeau in years past and now found himself back in Parliament once more as Conservative leader, expressed his warm personal regards for his old rival. Premier Lucien Bouchard, whose goal of a sovereign Quebec was an idea Trudeau had unfalteringly resisted throughout his life, spoke eloquently of the former prime minister's service to the francophones of that province. Brian Mulroney, who had devoted much of his time in power to reversing some aspects of the Trudeau legacy, also found much to praise in his late antagonist's political record. Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, who had served Trudeau loyally in many cabinet positions, was clearly shaken by his old leader's death, declaring that the entire country was indebted to Trudeau. Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter attended along with other world leaders who had sat opposite Trudeau in many international meetings during their time in power. And from Cuba came President Fidel Castro, a Communist and the world's longest-serving head of state. He had declared a period of national mourning in his country to honour Trudeau, a close personal friend who had extended much-needed support to him and his people over the years.

The presence at the funeral of important national and international figures gave considerable significance to Trudeau. As well, ordinary Canadians throughout the nation were deeply moved by the event, and flocked to locations across the country where books of condolence were available for signing. Fifty thousand people attended Trudeau's lying-in-state in the Parliamentary Hall of Honour in Ottawa; and later at Montreal's City Hall, the crowds waited patiently in line for up to five hours to pay their last respects. But perhaps the most moving image of all was that of the funeral train carrying Trudeau's casket, draped in the maple-leaf flag, travelling under the brilliant autumn sunshine through the picturesque countryside on the Ontario-Quebec border as he made his final journey from Ottawa to Montreal, from the federal capital where as head of government he had shaped the nation to his home and final resting place in the province of Quebec.

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Witnessing History

I have touched the highest point of all my greatness;
 And from that full meridian of my glory
 I haste now to my setting: I shall fall
 Like a bright exhalation in the evening,
 And no man see me more.
 William Shakespeare, King Henry VIII

As the train bearing Trudeau's body proceeded from Ottawa to Montreal, groups of people along the way stood waiting for him, some applauding, others singing the national anthem as the funeral train moved past them. As it slowed down in small stations like Maxville and Alexandria, Ontario, and then Coteau-du-lac, and Dorval, Quebec, Trudeau's sons Justin and Sacha waved, shook hands, and accepted flowers from the admiring throngs of English- and French-speaking Canadians. Witnessed on television by millions of Canadians, the events, images, and imagery have engraved Trudeau's death into the collective national memory. Most would agree that both the man and his political record have had profound significance for Canadians of all ages, backgrounds, regions, and viewpoints. Trudeau's vision of what Canada could be clearly remains a touchstone and an inspiration for the generation that grew to maturity during his time in office. But the media coverage of his death has also awakened the curiosity of many young Canadians born after his departure from politics, who want to learn more about the man, his beliefs, and his many achievements. In death as in life, Trudeau captivated an entire nation.

Trudeau and Greatness

Was Pierre Elliott Trudeau a great man? A great politician? A great leader? A great statesman? The adjective great, in dictionary terms, suggests someone who is considerably above the average, pre-eminent, imposing, and worthy of consideration, but for most people, the word has very profound emotional connotations. The public reaction to his death would suggest a collective sense of greatness, whether it was the man himself, his political legacy, his time and place in history, or perhaps even the public's need for a belief in the existence of greatness. For them, Trudeau was a "man for all seasons," with dash, a great intellect, tenacity and many other eclectic personal qualities.

As you watch this News in Review retrospective of the life of Trudeau, decide for yourself if he was indeed a "great" man. Base your assessment on the following:

- What you have seen in this report
- What you have heard in this report
- What you have concluded in terms of the historical information presented in the report

Follow-up Discussion

What do you imagine Pierre Elliott Trudeau might have said about greatness?

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Pierre Trudeau's death affected Canadians in a number of different ways. For those old enough to recall his period in office as Prime Minister, his demise provided an opportunity for quiet reflection and evaluation on the tumultuous upheavals that the nation had witnessed while he led the federal government. But for another group of Canadians, who had grown to adolescence and young adulthood since he left the public stage in 1984, Trudeau was already a figure from the past. To them, unlike their parents or older siblings, dramatic incidents such as the October Crisis of 1970, the Quebec referendum of 1980, and the patriation of the Constitution in 1982 were topics for lessons in history class, not the stuff of memory. But Trudeau's death has rekindled interest in the important passages in the recent political life of this country with which he was so closely associated.

As you read this brief chronology of the life and times of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, consider what, in your opinion, may have been the most significant events or influences in his life.

His Academic and Experiential Education, 1919-1949

October 18, 1919 Pierre Elliott Trudeau is born in Montreal, the son of Charles-Émile Trudeau, a wealthy lawyer, and Grace Elliott, a woman of mixed French and Scottish descent who spoke both English and French and raised her son to do the same.

1940 Trudeau graduates from the private Jesuit Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf, a prestigious and elite collège classique in Montreal known for its very high academic standards.

1943 Trudeau graduates from the Université de Montréal law school. His first political involvement occurs when he participates in the anti-conscription campaign that swept Quebec during the Second World War.

1943-44 Trudeau articulates with a Montreal law firm.

1944-46 Trudeau earns a Master of Arts degree in political economy from Harvard University, where he studies with the prominent Canadian-born economist, John Kenneth Galbraith.

1946-47 Trudeau travels to Paris and London to continue his studies in political economy at the prestigious and internationally renowned schools the École libre des sciences politiques and the London School of Economics.

1947-49 After his university studies, Trudeau travels the world, visiting Asia and the Middle East.

Reflection

1. What parts of Pierre Trudeau's upbringing do you think helped prepare him for his future career?

2. In what ways were Trudeau's childhood and youth typical of most Canadians? In what ways were they different?

Preparing For Politics, 1949-1968

1949 Trudeau takes part in the bitter strike of miners at Asbestos, Quebec, and writes a book about it. During the strike, he witnesses the anti-labour actions of the provincial government of Premier Maurice Duplessis and becomes a strong opponent of it.

1949-51 Trudeau works as a civil servant with the office of the Privy Council in Ottawa.

1950-1960s Trudeau contributes articles on Quebec politics and other topics to *Cité libre*, a review he founds with his friends and future political associates Jean Marchand, Gérard Pelletier, and René Lévesque. (Lévesque would one day be his bitter political opponent.) At this time, these men share a strong dislike of the dictatorial and backward-looking regime of Duplessis, and use their magazine as a sounding-board for criticism of it.

1960 One year after the death of Duplessis, the Quebec Liberals sweep to power under Jean Lesage, and the period known as the Quiet Revolution begins. Trudeau supports the rapid social and political changes occurring in the province, and becomes well-known as a professor of law at the Université de Montréal.

1962-63 Trudeau speaks on behalf of New Democratic Party candidates in Montreal who oppose the federal Liberals, led by Lester B. Pearson, over the issue of Canada's permitting the United States to station nuclear missiles in the country.

1965 Along with Pelletier and Marchand, Trudeau is recruited by the Liberals to run as a candidate in the federal election, in order to strengthen the party's profile in Quebec. Trudeau wins the riding of Mount Royal, defeating his old friend the political philosopher Charles Taylor. Trudeau, Pelletier, and Marchand are nicknamed the "three wise men" and all eventually receive positions in Pearson's cabinet.

1967 Trudeau is appointed Minister of Justice and introduces sweeping changes in Canada's legal system, including the legalization of lotteries, limited access to abortion, easier divorce, and legal recognition for homosexuals. In a famous phrase he used to justify such measures, he says, "The state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation."

February 1968 Following Pearson's resignation, the race for the leadership of the federal Liberal party heats up. Among the many cabinet ministers who declare themselves as candidates is Pierre Trudeau.

April 1968 Trudeau wins the Liberal leadership on the fourth ballot at the party convention in Ottawa, thus also becoming prime minister. In his acceptance speech, he vows to the delegates that he will make Canada a "just society." After being sworn in as Canada's 15th prime minister, he dissolves Parliament and calls an election for June.

June 1968 On the night before the election, Trudeau impresses Canadians by his refusal to leave the podium during a separatist riot at the St-Jean-Baptiste Day parade in Montreal. During the campaign leading up to the voting, the country had been swept by a wave of enthusiasm for Trudeau's charismatic personality and popular image. The media nicknamed this "Trudeaumania" after the Beatlemania phenomenon of the early 1960s. On June 25, the Liberals under Trudeau win their first majority government victory since 1953.

Reflection

1. What were the main changes Trudeau introduced in Canadian society as Minister of Justice? How do you think this has affected Canadian society?
2. What factors enabled Trudeau to become prime minister after serving only three years as a member of Parliament? In addition, what was the importance of the election of June 1968?
3. Why and how do you think Trudeau appealed to so many Canadians during the 1968 federal election campaign?

The First Years in Power, 1968-79

1969 Trudeau's government passes the Official Languages Act, recognizing French and English as Canada's two official languages. This measure is part of his goal to promote bilingualism across Canada as a means of convincing Quebecers that they should remain in this country and not consider separation. He also takes steps to make the federal civil service bilingual and increase the profile of francophone Canadians in government positions.

October 1970 Trudeau faces his first serious crisis when a radical separatist group in Quebec known as the FLQ (Front de Libération du Québec) kidnaps James Cross, a British trade official in Montreal. A week later, another FLQ cell kidnaps Pierre Laporte, the provincial minister of labour. Believing that a state of "apprehended insurrection" exists in Quebec, Trudeau invokes the War Measures Act, a draconian law that permits the police to arrest and detain hundreds of people, and places the army on the streets. Within 36 hours, the FLQ group holding Laporte murders him and leaves his body in the trunk of a car. Two months later, the police discover the FLQ hideout where Cross is held, and capture his kidnappers and later those responsible for Laporte's murder. Both groups are allowed to go into exile in Cuba. Trudeau's use of the War Measures Act wins him immense public support at the time, but later some criticize it as a heavy-handed and repressive overreaction.

March 1971 The 53-year-old bachelor Trudeau, known for dating famous and glamorous women like singer Barbra Streisand, marries Margaret Sinclair, a Vancouver woman 30 years his junior. Their first son, Justin, is born later that year, followed by Sacha in 1973 and Michel in 1975.

October 1972 As inflation and unemployment rise, public resentment over the federal government's inaction and what some see as an excessive push for bilingualism, turns Trudeaumania into "Trudeaophobia." The Liberals barely hang on to power in a minority government, depending on the New Democrats for support in Parliament. During the two years that follow, a number of important steps are taken to strengthen Canada's economic independence and self-reliance, such as the establishment of Petro-Canada (the government energy company) and the Foreign Investment Review Agency (FIRA), a body that examines and rules on American takeovers of Canadian companies.

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July 1974 After a snap election campaign, Trudeau's Liberals regain their majority status in Parliament. His vow not to introduce wage and price controls, a policy that is extremely unpopular with Canadian workers and that the Tories had announced as part of their platform is the major reason for Trudeau's victory.

October 1975 Trudeau appears on national television to announce that wage and price controls are to be introduced after all in order to deal with skyrocketing inflation. Finance Minister John Turner resigns from the cabinet in protest over the government's breaking of an election promise.

1977 Following a period of marital discord that attracts much media attention, Trudeau announces that he and Margaret are separating. He maintains custody of their three children, while Margaret continues to fuel the public's and media's taste for gossip and scandal. In 1983, their divorce is finalized.

1975-79 Trudeau's second majority government endures a succession of crises, including more cabinet resignations, political scandals, the election of a separatist government in Quebec, continuing economic problems, and growing opposition to official bilingualism. His spending policies promote national goals like medicare but are criticized by some economists as leading to a serious deficit problem.

May 1979 After waiting the maximum five years before calling another election, Trudeau campaigns on the issue of national unity while his main opponents address the issues of unemployment and inflation. The Conservatives under new leader Joe Clark win enough seats to form a minority government, but their support in Quebec is weak and they depend on a divided opposition to remain in office.

November 1979 Trudeau announces his resignation as Liberal leader, but a few weeks later Clark's government falls after losing a vote of non-confidence in Parliament. The frantic Liberals convince Trudeau to stay on and fight the next election as their leader.

Reflection

1. What major political and personal problems did Trudeau face during his first eleven years in power? How do you think these problems affect his historical image?
2. What would you consider to be Trudeau's greatest achievements and failures during this period of his administration?

The Subsequent Years in Power, 1980-84

February 1980 Trudeau wins yet another majority, and announces to the celebrating crowd of supporters "Well, welcome to the 1980s!" He pledges to patriate the Constitution (bring it home to Canada from Britain) with an entrenched Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

May 1980 Trudeau eloquently defends the cause of federalism during the Quebec sovereignty

referendum campaign, and helps the "no" side win a decisive victory over Premier René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois, supporters of the "yes" position.

November 1981 After a year of intense negotiations with the provincial premiers, Trudeau wins agreement from nine of the 10 provinces on a formula to patriate the Constitution with a Charter of Rights and Freedoms. On behalf of Quebec, René Lévesque is the only holdout.

April 17, 1982 In a formal ceremony in Ottawa, the Queen and Trudeau sign the Canadian Constitution into law. This is perhaps Trudeau's greatest achievement as prime minister.

June 1982 Trudeau introduces his "six and five" economic policy to curb inflation, holding public sector workers' salaries to six and five per cent over two years. This helps reduce inflation from 12 per cent in 1982 to four per cent by the end of 1983. However, a sharp recession in 1981-82 pushes unemployment up. At the same time, Trudeau's National Energy Policy (NEP), designed to protect Canadian consumers from high oil and gas prices, becomes very unpopular in the West, in particular in Alberta.

1983 As Cold War tensions increase between the United States and the Soviet Union, Trudeau embarks on his Global Peace Initiative, an effort to reduce the level of hostility between the two superpowers and promote understanding. Prior to this, Trudeau played a major part in supporting the North-South dialogue between the wealthy and poor nations of the world.

February 29, 1984 Trudeau announces his resignation as prime minister. A few months later, he delivers a passionate farewell speech to the delegates at the Liberal leadership convention, who select his former cabinet minister John Turner as his successor.

Reflection

1. Identify and explain the following: Quebec sovereignty referendum, patriation, Charter of Rights and Freedoms, René Lévesque, "six and five" policy, NEP, Global Peace Initiative, North-South dialogue. In your opinion, what role did these play in shaping Trudeau's legacy?
2. What do you think historians will view as Trudeau's greatest accomplishments during his 1980-84 government? Why?

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The Trudeau Legacy

In the days following Pierre Trudeau's death, politicians, media commentators, and ordinary Canadians all referred to his "legacy" to the country and to the people he once led. Some pointed to the achievements of his government, like the patriation of the Canadian Constitution. Others praised the lofty goals he had tried to set for Canadians, such as bilingualism, multiculturalism, and the vision of a "just society." Still others regarded the style and personality of the man himself as his true legacy to the country. Trudeau had been unlike any other political figure who had preceded him, and there was a strong suspicion among many Canadians that the country would not see another one like him for some time to come. On the other hand, there were some voices expressing doubts about just how substantial Trudeau's political legacy really was. While not questioning his intellectual ability, strength of character, personal charm, or qualities of leadership, these critics wondered if Trudeau's government had really contributed to the solution of the main problems facing Canada at that time, or whether in fact its policies had actually helped to make them worse and more enduring. As evidence, they pointed to issues such as Trudeau's imposition of the War Measures Act in 1970, his abrupt policy "flip-flop" over wage and price controls after the 1974 election, his lavish government spending policies and the deficits they incurred, his National Energy Policy, which aroused such opposition in Western Canada, and his government's inability to deal effectively with serious economic problems like high interest rates, inflation, and unemployment during its last years in power.

Stephen Clarkson, a political scientist and co-author of a major study on Trudeau, has observed that ". . . it's beginning to look as though any attempt to identify Pierre Trudeau's legacy is as much about us as it is about him." He is suggesting that the kinds of historical evaluations people make of Trudeau and his government will invariably reflect their own political values and beliefs. One thing is certain, though. The immense wave of media and public attention that Trudeau's death attracted across the country will prompt many Canadians of all ages to focus more closely on the record of his government, in terms of what it set out to do, what it achieved, and where it failed.

Assessment Activity

Below is an example of one major policy that Trudeau and his government pursued from 1968-84, and some positive and negative points that can be made about it. Using this policy as an example, find recent newspaper or magazine articles that discuss Trudeau's legacy and any information you obtained from the video. Then, form groups with your classmates to make two lists of negative and positive points that could also be made about the other policy areas listed below with which Trudeau and his government were involved. Then decide as a group whether or not you think Trudeau's contribution in the policy area you investigated was on balance positive or negative. Present your findings to the rest of the class for further discussion and debate.

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Pierre Trudeau first became prime minister of Canada when I was two years old and left office when I was 18. I took his presence for granted because from the moment I knew what a prime minister was until I became a young adult, he had held that position for all but nine months. When something is that constant in your life, you don't usually think about it, especially if you've never experienced anything else. It wasn't until much later that I realized the significance of Pierre Trudeau's ideas and the impact of his accomplishments. And it wasn't until he died on September 28, 2000, that I fully appreciated how much his life and career had meant to me and to Canada.

When I heard of his death, I was shocked. I felt a need to bear witness, and like many Ottawans I headed to Parliament Hill to pay my respects. I waited four hours in line to have a few seconds at his flag-draped casket. I was moved by the death of a man whom I had never met an alien experience for me. In fact, I tend to scoff when someone becomes emotional about the death of a celebrity. But this time I was the one genuinely grieving. And I wasn't the only one; many Canadians were sharing the same grief. I felt a need to know the source of that feeling.

For me, the answer came down to values. Trudeau had a vision for Canada that included the peaceful co-existence of many cultures within a society that cherished the values of equality and diversity. I have had the opportunity to enrich myself by living in another country and meeting people from all over the world. My experience abroad has had the ironic effect of teaching me a great deal about my own country, by allowing me to contrast Canadian ideas and values with those of other countries. One thing I noticed when I was overseas was that in other countries everyone is expected to fit into a certain mould and basically act in the same way. People from elsewhere might be welcomed as immigrants but they are often expected to blend in with the ethnic majority. Such a "melting-pot" culture means that newcomers tend to shed their ethnic distinctiveness in order to fit in with the majority culture. By contrast, Canada has a different approach that has produced our "cultural mosaic," meaning that we as a collection of many cultures take pride in our differences rather than seeing them as a weakness, or source of division. Often a nation's sense of pride comes from having a limited and well-defined group of cultural values. I believe that in Canada, our pride derives from our ability to embrace diversity and enjoy what it has to offer us all.

Trudeau was a pioneer in establishing the policy of multiculturalism. He had the vision of a country in which social justice ensured that all people, of whatever ethnic origin, could freely celebrate their cultural heritage. He believed that by extending the same rights to all through the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, he could help create a great country where justice and equality would prevail. These values that he helped to instill have become so much a part of the Canadian identity that we don't even notice how important and unique they are. It was only when I saw these ideas and values from a distance that I realized how rare they are, and how lucky I was to be a Canadian. It was only after Pierre Trudeau died that I knew how fortunate we all were to have had a leader with his vision.

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- Using recent newspaper or magazine articles, or images downloaded from the Internet, prepare a collage or storyboard of photographs of Trudeau's funeral and/or his life and times. Discuss the reasons for your choice of images.
- Compare and contrast the public reaction to Trudeau's death and funeral with those of other famous individuals in recent years, either in Canada or elsewhere (for example, Princess Diana, Mother Teresa, Maurice "Rocket" Richard, and John F. Kennedy Jr.). To what extent do you think the outpouring of emotion that follows such events is a genuine expression of collective sorrow, a creation of the mass media, or a more universal need in humans that requires a form of expression?
- Read one of the following books dealing with Pierre Trudeau's life, political career, and impact on Canadian society and write a report on it: *Trudeau and Our Times* (2 volumes), by Stephen Clarkson and Christina McCall; *Northern Magus: Pierre Trudeau and Canadians*, by Richard Gwynn; *Towards a Just Society: The Trudeau Years*, by Thomas Axworthy and Pierre E. Trudeau; *Memoirs* by Pierre E. Trudeau; *Pirouette: Pierre Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy* by J.L. Granatstein and Robert Bothwell; *Trudeau Albums*, ed. Mordecai Richler; *Trudeau's Shadow: The Life and Legacy of Pierre Elliott Trudeau*, ed. Ron Graham; *Paddling with the Current: Pierre Elliott Trudeau*, by Étienne Parent; *Liberalism and Nationalism in Canada*, by Claude Couture; *Misconceiving Canada: The Struggle for National Unity*, by Kenneth McRoberts; *Against the Current: Selected Writings, 1939-1996*, by Pierre Elliott Trudeau; *One-Eyed Kings: Promise and Illusion in Canadian Politics*, by Ron Graham; *The Patriot Game*, by Peter Brimelow; *Close to the Charisma: My Years between the Press and Pierre Elliott Trudeau*, by Patrick Gossage; *The National Deal: The Fight for a Canadian Constitution*, by Robert Sheppard and Michael Valpy
- As a class, obtain and watch the NFB documentary *The Champions* (1986: Donald Brittain, director), which covers the political rivalry between Pierre Trudeau and René Lévesque and its impact on Canadian politics from the 1960s to the 1980s. Discuss the portrayal of these two figures and how their struggles over Quebec and its place in Canada shaped our current political situation.
- As a class, view excerpts from the documentary film *Memoirs* (CBC: 1993, Terence McKenna, director) and discuss how they contribute to your understanding of Pierre Trudeau's political and personal life.
- As a class, read and discuss the poem *In Memoriam: Pierre Elliott Trudeau*, by Canadian poet Lorna Crozier (www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/crozier/index.htm), which was published in many newspapers shortly after his death. What are your reactions to the thoughts and feelings the author expresses about Trudeau in this poem? How do you respond to the literary images she invokes?

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